



# NEWSLETTER

**SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**  
**SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF THE MILITARY**



## WAGNER BRIDGE DEDICATION

Last week, South Dakotans gathered in Alexandria to honor South Dakota Veterans and to dedicate another South Dakota fallen hero bridge.

On Thursday, November 11, the South Dakota HWY 38 Bridge over the James River, east of Mitchell, was dedicated in honor of U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Gregory Wagner.

Wagner graduated in 1989 from Hanson High School in Alexandria, and soon after enlisted in the South Dakota National Guard. His unit was deployed to Iraq in October 2005. On May 8, 2006, he died when his convoy was attacked in a Baghdad neighborhood.

Speakers for the program included: Lt. Governor Larry Rhoden, SDDVA Secretary Greg Whitlock, SDNG COL Phil Stiles, U. S. Senator John Thune, and Greg's brother, Dan Wagner.

This event concluded the bridge dedications for 2021. The selection committee will meet in April to select heroes for 2022 bridge dedications.



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# VA SOLICITS INPUT ON ACCESS STANDARDS AND STANDARDS FOR QUALITY

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs published two notices in the Federal Register asking for comment on the VA's access standards and standards for quality.

The notices, which have been briefed to Congress, solicit public comment on the VA's current access standards and standards for quality to ensure they include the most up-to-date and applicable measures for veterans.

"As I said when confirmed, the VA would continue to work to fully implement the VA MISSION Act of 2018", said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. "Reviewing standards for care and access standards is a key part of that implementation and helps ensure we are providing information that veterans and caregivers need to help them make the best-informed health care decisions, so they get the care they need when and where it is appropriate."



**FEDERAL REGISTER**  
The Daily Journal of the United States Government

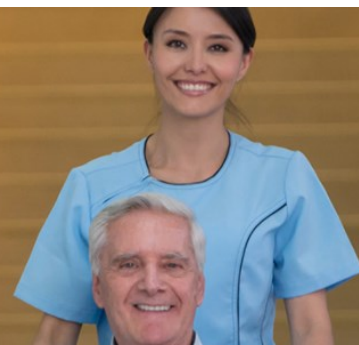


The published federal notices, [VA Standards for Quality](#) and a [Notice of Request for Information Regarding Health Care Access Standards](#), both can be viewed at [www.regulations.gov](http://www.regulations.gov).

Information on health care access and quality is available on the VA [Access to Care](#) website.

The VA values the feedback from veterans and the public and will review closely the comments it receives as it assesses the access standards and standards for quality. In addition to considering public comments, the VA will be conducting a broader internal review of the standards for quality in fiscal year 2022 to ensure they are up-to-date, in alignment with VHA and industry changes in metrics, and address veteran priorities.

Access and Quality in VA:  
Healthcare



# VA AND HEROES FOUNDATION CREATE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR VETERANS

The United States Department of Veteran Affairs recently partnered with the Daniel and Salvador Montoya [Heroes Foundation](#) to facilitate corporate hiring opportunities for veterans and transitioning service members.

The partnership, effective Sept. 15, also aims to educate corporate employers about VA resources that can help improve veterans' health and wellbeing such as benefits, community veteran engagement boards, [Veteran Community Partnerships](#), and [Compensated Work Therapy](#).

The Veterans Health Administration and Heroes Foundation will work to improve the quality of veterans' lives by providing opportunities for economic stability, employment, and health literacy.

Most importantly, it will raise employer awareness of the risk factors of suicide and VA suicide prevention tools for veterans. This is vital, as [research](#) shows that lack of employment and low income can contribute to poor veteran health outcomes, including suicidal ideation and suicide attempts.

"Unemployment rates among veterans [spiked](#) to 11.9% in April 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic caused widespread job loss," said VA [National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnerships](#) Nurse Executive Tracy L. Weistreich, Ph.D. "While veteran unemployment rates have since [leveled out](#), partnerships like this help employers hire and retain more veterans while being sensitive to their unique experiences."

For more information about veteran employment services, visit: <https://www.benefits.va.gov/vow/>.





# **SD NATIONAL GUARD UNIT TO DEPLOY TO EUROPE**

The South Dakota National Guard's 129th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment has received a federal mobilization order for a 12-month deployment to Europe beginning in May 2022.

Ten soldiers with the Rapid City-based unit will provide public affairs support to units within the European Command area of operation.

The unit is comprised of officers and mass communications specialists which gather and distribute print and broadcast media, facilitate civilian news media, and support command communication initiatives.

The unit will report to Fort Bliss, Texas, to complete several weeks of training prior to deployment.

# **MOODY COUNTY NAMES NEW VETERANS SERVICE OFFICER**

Jim DeLay retired as Moody County veterans service officer with over 11 years of service, and the Moody County Commission selected Jerrick Charles as their new Moody County veterans service officer/emergency manager. His office hours will be from 8:00 am—5:00 pm Monday—Friday and his email address remains the same: [mcvso@moodycounty.net](mailto:mcvso@moodycounty.net).

Jerrick served in the United States Marine Corps from 1997-2014.

# **AMERICAN LEGION MAKES LARGE DONATION TO MIDWEST HONOR FLIGHT**

Hats off and a big SHOUT OUT to the American Legion Department of South Dakota and all their members.

On Veterans Day, they presented a check for \$126,150 to the Midwest Honor Flight to help sponsor over 80 veterans on an Honor Flight trip. GREAT JOB American Legion partners!



# SD ARMY NATIONAL GUARD NAMES SOLDIER, NCO OF THE YEAR

The South Dakota Army National Guard selected four enlisted soldiers and six non-commissioned officers to compete in the state's Best Warrior Competition in Rapid City, Nov. 5-7, to identify the next Soldier and Non-Commissioned Officer of the Year, respectively.

After the three-day competition, Staff Sgt. Jordan Johnson, a member with the Joint Force Headquarters, was named the SDARNG's Non-Commissioned Officer of the Year. Spc. Jedidiah Vissia, a member with the 115th Signal Company, was named the SDARNG Soldier of the Year.

"The Best Warrior Competition is a chance for the best soldiers from each individual unit to come together here at Camp Rapid and show us their skills and it's their time to shine," said Sgt. Maj. Michael Wilkening, the human resources equal opportunity sergeant major with the Joint Force Headquarters. "They compete and do the best they can."

The BWC challenges soldiers academically, mentally, physically, and technically using multiple tasks focused on key areas.

The competition and the training involved preparing for it provides the competitors not only with the opportunity to improve themselves, but also to improve their peers and subordinates as well.

"We come out here for about three days and we test them to the maximum of their ability, seeing where all their potential is at," said Command Sgt. Maj. Patrick Couser, the senior enlisted leader of the South Dakota National Guard. "We want to get one NCO and one enlisted member to shine above everybody else, our best warriors."

Johnson and Vissia will advance to the Region 6 Best Warrior Competition, which is scheduled to be held in May 2022 at Camp Guernsey, Wyoming. They will face competitors from Alaska, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming.

The NCO of the Year runner-up/alternate was Staff Sgt. Matthew Bullis, Forward Support Company, 109th Engineer Battalion, and the Soldier of the Year runner-up/alternate was Spc. Connor Ullrich, Headquarters Company, 153rd Engineer Battalion.

"They're not only competing against one another, but there is a bond there too," said Sgt. 1st Class Chris Peters, a sergeant with the Joint Force Headquarters. "When you get to compete with somebody, especially of your peer group, it makes you want to drive harder."



# VA ACCESSES RESOURCES TO INCREASE HOUSING ASSISTANCE FOR VULNERABLE VETERANS

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs updated [regulations](#) Nov. 10 governing the [Supportive Services for Veteran Families grant program](#) to provide a more effective subsidy to veterans in high-cost rental markets and to increase the cap in general housing assistance available to the most vulnerable veteran families.

Under the new regulations, in certain communities, the SSVF grant will cover up to 50%, an increase from 35%, of eligible veterans' reasonable rent for two years without need for recertification.

"We know veterans are increasingly vulnerable to homelessness and housing insecurity," said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. "The updated regulations give Supportive Services for Veteran Families grantees more flexibility and tools to keep veterans housed while also helping them increase their income and access permanent affordable housing solutions."

The new rule also expands the maximum stay in emergency housing for unsheltered veterans.

The original rule authorized placement for a veteran and his or her spouse with dependents in emergency housing for up to 45 days, which proved often not enough time to locate stable and affordable permanent housing in highly competitive rental markets.

A veteran and his or her spouse with dependents can now stay in emergency housing for a maximum of 60 days. The 15-day increase in length-of-stay is expected to have the most significant benefit to veteran families in rental markets with few vacancies, as well as unsheltered homeless veterans families.

Ending veteran homelessness is a top priority for the VA, aligned with the White House's [priority](#) to promote housing stability by supporting vulnerable tenants.

Learn more about the VA's mission to [end homelessness among veterans](#).



# VA CELEBRATES CAREGIVERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY FOR COMMITMENT TO AMERICA'S VETERANS

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs' [Caregiver Support Program](#) is presenting a month-long series of virtual [events](#) and activities celebrating veterans' caregivers in recognition of [National Family Caregivers Month](#).

The observance is hosted by VA facilities nationwide with the intent to educate veteran caregivers about VA programs and services, and to recognize and honor caregivers across the country.

"This year's theme is #CaregiverAnd, which aims to encourage caregivers to embrace their sense of self, including their identities outside of being caregivers," said VA Caregiver Support Program Executive Director, Colleen M. Richardson, Psy.D. "We know there are many components that make our caregivers who they are. They have passions beyond caregiving, and we want to recognize them outside of their day-to-day responsibilities."

This year's VA virtual NFCM events will emphasize the stories of those who care for and support veterans and will include discussion panels and networking opportunities with fellow caregivers. Caregivers can check out events happening in their local areas by contacting their [Caregiver Support Coordinator](#).



National Family Caregivers Month  
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Caregivers and needing additional assistance, support, or information about VA's Caregiver Support Program, can visit [www.caregiver.va.gov](http://www.caregiver.va.gov).

# **VA PILOTS EVALUATION MODEL TO DETERMINE POTENTIAL EXPOSURE TO ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS WHILE SERVING**

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs announced Nov. 11 it is piloting a comprehensive military exposure [model](#) to consider possible relationships of in-service environmental hazards to medical conditions.

The goal of this new model is to lower the burden of proof for veterans impacted by exposures and speed up the delivery of health care and benefits they need.

The new model will continue to leverage scientific findings from the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine available; and relevant scientific research data, surveillance of veterans' health outcomes, and adding the review of VA claims data and military environmental research for trends and identify new concerns. At the direction of the president, the first conditions this pilot will actively consider are rare respiratory cancers and constrictive bronchiolitis. Consistent with his demands, the VA anticipates answers on these conditions by mid-2022.

"We are seeking more information from veterans, more evidence from more sources, and looking to take every avenue possible to determine where a potential presumptive illness based on military service location may exist in a more expedient and holistic manner," said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. "We want all veterans who may have been impacted to file a claim even if it was previously denied."

The presumptive decision model pilot will run from Nov. 15, 2021, to April 1, 2022. The VA will look to use the results of the pilot to formalize the model after April 1, 2022. Over the last six months, the VA has extended benefits and services to veterans impacted by military exposures due to [Agent Orange](#) and [particulate matter](#).

If a veteran has a condition they believe is attributed to an event during military service, they are highly encouraged to file a claim. SDDVA encourages veterans to work with their county or tribal veterans service officers to file a claim, or to reach out to our SDDVA team.



# NORTHERN HILLS VETERANS APPRECIATION FAIR

Over 40 vendors participated in the second annual Northern Hills Veterans Appreciation Fair last Friday in Sturgis.

SDDVA Field Service Officer Will Huffmon manned the SDDVA booth at the Fair and reports that over 125 veterans and 34 family members attended the event. As with all outreach events, this Fair provided great opportunities for the SDDVA team to assist veterans with any claims they might have and educate them on all benefits and services available to them and their families.

# VA HELPS WOMEN VETERAN ENTREPRENEURS POWER UP

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs, in collaboration with the PenFed Foundation, helped three women-owned small businesses earn business development grants used to support their growing companies in the economic marketplace. The recipients received a total of \$30,000 from participating in the Oct. 4 [Women Veteran GovCon Bootcamp Accelerator Pitch Competition](#).

The pitch competition was the conclusion of a series of business-development trainings co-hosted by the VA Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization and the PenFed Foundation. Judges considered several criteria, including the value proposition of the pitch, if it offered a better solution than what is currently available on the market, and how the grant might help winners scale and grow their businesses.

When asked about the program, recipients shared that they felt empowered, engaged, and better prepared for the future of their business.

"This program was amazing because it taught me a lot about federal contracting," said first place winner, Army Veteran and president of Abrado Analytics Lisa Van Wormer. "I thought I knew a lot about federal contracting because of my military service. However, this program taught me things I needed to know as a business owner. The program really helped me focus on the path I had to take to grow my company."

Second place winner Veronica Lane, Navy Veteran and president of WJM Professional Services, has been in federal contracting for more than 27 years and recommends this program to any women veteran-owned small business looking to expand their knowledge base. "You're going to learn that the government contract landscape changes on a daily basis."

Finishing third was Liseth Velez, National Guard Veteran and president of LJV Development. She shared, "I had some experience with federal contracting, but this program went right to the nitty-gritty."

The goal of the GovCon Bootcamp Accelerator program is to empower women Veteran entrepreneurs and improve women veteran business owners' well-being by getting them access to nationwide resources.

Learn more about PenFed Foundation's [Veteran Entrepreneur Investment Program](#). The [Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization](#) has information about VA's program to help women veteran entrepreneurs achieve success and economic opportunities.

# VA UPDATES DISABILITY RATING SCHEDULES FOR GENITOURINARY AND CARDIOVASCULAR SYSTEMS

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs announced its update to the genitourinary and cardiovascular regulations in the [VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities at Title 38 Code of Federal Regulations](#).

The changes were made to ensure that these portions of the rating schedule contain current medical terminology and provide detailed and updated criteria for the evaluations related to genitourinary and cardiovascular disabilities.

The VA renamed conditions, removed obsolete language, clarified ambiguities, and added conditions with appropriate diagnostic codes not previously identified in the VASRD. While finalizing the rulemaking, the VA received, considered, and responded to comments from the National Organization of Veterans' Advocates Inc., American Association of Nurse Practitioners, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and veterans.

"These changes are important to the claims processing procedures and are based on scientific and medical information that is vital in making consistent claims decisions for our veterans," said VA Acting Under Secretary for Benefits Thomas Murphy. "Claims related to genitourinary and cardiovascular conditions that were pending on Nov. 14, 2021, will be considered under both the old and new rating criteria, and whichever criteria is more favorable to the veteran will be applied."

The complete list of updates to the VASRD for the genitourinary and cardiovascular systems is now available [online](#). For veterans already receiving evaluations for the genitourinary and cardiovascular conditions impacted by this change, the VA will not reduce the evaluation simply based on the rating schedule change. A reduction in evaluation will only occur if there is improvement in a disability sufficient to warrant a reduction under the former criteria.

The VA has issued several VASRD updates since September 2017, including updates for dental and oral conditions, conditions related to the endocrine system, gynecological conditions and disorders of the breast, diseases of the eye, infectious diseases, conditions of the hemic and lymphatic systems, skin conditions, and musculoskeletal and muscle injuries.

# HEUER NAMED MJFSVH EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH

Teena Heuer, household coordinator was selected as the October 2021 Employee of the Month at the Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home in Hot Springs.

"Teena is one of our strongest and most dedicated leaders within the state veterans home," said Susan Wilcox, MJFSVH director of nursing. "She is our go-to-person to meet industry standards, fill voids, and works to hold her team accountable in performing resident care. Teena operates so well with her staff and it's a pleasure to work alongside her."

"I'm very pleased Teena was nominated and selected as MJFSVH employee of the month," said Brad Richardson, superintendent. "She sets the bar high and leads by example for our entire clinical department."



## VA Research Study for OIF/OEF/OND Veterans



Investigators: Drs. Jeffrey Simons, Raluca Simons, and Pat Ronan

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b><u>What:</u></b> Study of stress and health behaviors</li> <li>• <b><u>Where:</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sioux Falls VA</li> <li>- University of South Dakota – Vermillion</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b><u>You need to be:</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Between the ages of 18 and 60 years old</li> <li>- Have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b><u>The study will involve 22 visits over a period of 2 years</u></b></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b><u>If you participate you will receive:</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Opportunity to assist future veterans by participating in research aimed at improving veteran health.</li> <li>- Compensation for your time and travel may include \$50 for completing a baseline assessment, \$50 for each of 10 in office assessments, and up to \$135/week for each of 17 self-monitoring weeks completed, depending on number of completed assessments (up to ~2500)</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
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For more information please contact:

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# UPCOMING EVENTS

Nov 20—SDNG Crossroads Event—Camp Rapid (Building 802) —Rapid City—7:45 am (MT)  
Nov 25-26—State Offices Closed  
Dec 7—Governor’s Budget Address  
Dec 13—SDFDA Wreath Laying Ceremony—Capitol Lake Flaming Fountain—Pierre—11:00 am (CT)  
Dec 18—Wreaths Across America—South Dakota Veterans Cemetery—Sioux Falls—11:00 am (CT)  
Dec 24—State Offices Closed  
Dec 31—State Offices Closed

## 2022

Jan 10—POW/MIA Chair of Honor Dedication—State Capitol—2:00 pm (CT)  
Jan 11—Governor’s State of the State Address  
Jan 12—SD Veterans Council Meeting—Redrossa Italian Grille—Pierre—3:00 pm (CT)  
Jan 12—SD Veterans Council/SDDVA Legislative Reception—Redrossa Italian Grille—Pierre—5:30—7:30 pm (CT)  
Feb 18-20—American Legion Mid Winter Conference—Oacoma  
Apr 8-10—DAV of South Dakota State Convention—Rushmore Hotel and Suites (445 Mt. Rushmore Road)—  
Rapid City  
Jun 9-12—State VFW Convention—Ramada Inn—Mitchell  
Jun 12—Midwest Honor Flight Annual Honor Ride  
Jun 16-19—State American Legion Conference—Watertown  
Jul 18-23—National Veterans Golden Age Games—Sioux Falls  
Jul 31-Aug 4 – Military Order of the Purple Heart National Convention – Rapid City  
Aug 15-18—SDDVA Annual CTVSO Benefit School

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